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C O N F I D E N T I A L ZAGREB 000086

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR - P/DAS VOLKER, DAS DICARLO, EUR/RPM,
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TAGS: PREL PGOV KPAO MOPS MARR NATO HR DEFENSE REFORM
SUBJECT: NATO ENLARGEMENT: SUSTAINING CROATIA'S PROGRESS

REF: A. ZAGREB 46
 1B. ZAGREB 62
 1C. ZAGREB 65
 1D. STATE 8781
 1E. USNATO 22
 1F. ZAGREB 69

Classified By: Political Officer Tom Selinger for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (U) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Upon formation of PM Sanader's new government, the Ambassador met with President Mesic, PM Sanader (ref A), FM Jandrovic (ref B), DefMin Vukelic, and Speaker of Parliament Bebic (ref C). At all of these meetings, he discussed the GoC's strategy to address Croatia's key remaining issues before NATO's Bucharest Summit, as outlined in ref D. The PM was already energized by comments made by NATO PermReps at the Jan 16 NAC session concluding the GoC's sixth MAP cycle (ref E), and leaders are now actively engaged in making sure there is no reason to question a Croatian invite in April. In addition, the GoC has demonstrated a clear understanding at all levels that reforms must continue beyond the NATO invitation. END
SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

SUPPORT STILL CLIMBING, INFO CAMPAIGN EXPANDING

12. (C) Croatia's State Committee on NATO, which includes the President and PM as well as key ministers and parliamentarians, met Jan 28 and approved an expanded public information campaign to build on already growing support for membership. This will reportedly include numerous broadcast and print media interviews, public roundtables, university debates, internet pages, military "open houses," and NATO "Info Points" in public libraries. PM Sanader explained to the Ambassador on Jan 21 that the GoC will use the Croatian military's participation in Afghanistan as an example of what it means to be a NATO member, giving a larger role to ISAF veterans in public outreach and sending journalists to Kabul, Chagcharan, and Mazar-e Sharif to interview soldiers currently serving there.

13. (SBU) The President, FM, DefMin, and Speaker all shared the PM's enthusiasm, with the President promising a "demanding and comprehensive" public relations campaign at a gathering of NATO-member state ambassadors on Jan 29. The FM pointed to his newly appointed spokesperson Mario Dragun, a

PR professional recruited from the private sector, as a sign that the MFA was taking its outreach mission seriously. The FM brought Neven Mikec, the former head of the ministry's NATO office, up to be his chief of cabinet, and promised to appoint a qualified replacement. Croatian Ambassador to NATO Davor Bozinovic, who spearheaded efforts to bring support up from a historic low of 30 percent in late 2006 to the current figures over 50 percent, will continue to play a key role in public outreach, according to Jandrokovic.

¶4. (U) Two recent polls, neither commissioned by the GoC, show a continuing upward trend in public support. Leading polling agencies PULS and Promocija Plus have both released results in February showing more than 51 percent of Croatians in favor of NATO membership. Earlier results from PULS had lagged behind government-sponsored polling, making this the first time this agency has shown support above 50 percent.

COMMITTED TO RESOLVING PROPERTY RESTITUTION ISSUE

¶5. (C) The Ambassador stressed to PM Sanader that NATO membership depended on ratification after an invitation, and they agreed on the need to resolve WW II and communist-era property restitution claims of non-Croatian citizens. FM Jandrokovic told the Ambassador that the GoC was "completely committed" to moving ahead with amendments to the property restitution law to give non-Croatians the same legal remedies as citizens, and Speaker Bebic indicated that the Sabor was prepared to consider such legislation.

SOFA SIGNATURE ON HORIZON

¶6. (C) The PM told the Ambassador on Jan 21 that the government would approve the final SOFA text within a week or two, so Post expects movement soon on this issue within days. He was amenable to a signing ceremony in Washington on the margins of the A-3 Defense Ministerial Feb 18 to 20.

REFUGEE RETURNS: BRINGING ETHNIC SERBS INTO GOC

¶7. (C) With respect to refugee returns, PM Sanader pointed to his extensive governing coalition agreement with the SDSS (Independent Democratic Serbian Party), which he said will ensure progress on the refugee housing issue beyond the benchmarks achieved in 2007 (ref F). He also highlighted the fact that he had brought a member of the Serb minority into the government for the first time in Croatia's history to serve as a Deputy Prime Minister with responsibility for refugee returns.

BEYOND BUCHAREST: BECOMING THE BEST POSSIBLE ALLY

¶8. (C) In all of the Ambassador's meetings, Croatian leaders demonstrated a clear understanding that an invitation in Bucharest was merely another stepping stone on a long path of reforms aimed at making Croatia a capable and committed ally.

PM Sanader promised to continue work "beyond Bucharest," while President Mesic said that Croatia wants to finish what NATO SGY Scheffer calls the marathon to membership at "the same pace we started."

¶9. (C) DefMin Vukelic, who has already made one creditable appearance on a national TV talk show to promote NATO accession, also acknowledged the long-term nature of many reforms. He highlighted the GoC's commitment to its 10-year restructuring and modernization plan for their military, which will continue many years after Croatia's expected entry into the Alliance.

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